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## What if and What More: disturbing habits of thought about playwork 're-search'

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### Cover Page Footnote

If readers are interested in reading more about this approach, they are welcome to contact Bridget or John (manager@gwealantops.org) and request a copy of the interim evaluation report for Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground (2018). Other reading includes: Fitzpatrick, J, and Handscomb, B, 2015 There's no full stop after playwork, *Journal of Playwork Practice*, 2, 2, 175-82 Fitzpatrick, J, and Handscomb, B, 2017, Co-creating spaces on an adventure playground: Using participatory action research as an approach to continuing professional development, in W. Russell, S. Lester and H. Smith, 2017 *Practice-based research in children's play*, Bristol: Policy Press Lester, S, 2013, Playing in a Deleuzian playground, in E. Ryall, W. Russell and M. Maclean, (eds) *Philosophy of Play*, London: Routledge Lester, S, Fitzpatrick, J, and Russell, W, 2014, Co-creating an adventure playground (CAP): Reading playwork stories, practices and artefacts, Gloucester: University of Gloucestershire, available at <http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/3311/1/Cocreating%20a%20Play%20Space%20300914.pdf> Russell, W, Lester, S, and Smith, H, 2017, What do we want research in children's play to do?, in W. Russell, S. Lester, and H. Smith, (eds) *Practice-based Research in Children's Play*, Bristol: Policy Press

## **What if and What More: disturbing habits of thought about playwork ‘re-search’**

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### **Abstract**

This short article reports on a presentation given at an *International Journal of Playwork* Practice seminar in 2018. It describes an approach to evaluating the work of an adventure playground using Participative Action Research and a critical cartographic method for producing documentation that shows the unique nature of playwork.

### **Key words:**

Participative Action Research, critical cartography, evaluation, playwork, adventure playground

### **Introduction**

Over the past few years, Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell have been working with playwork practitioners to develop an approach to documenting playwork that can be used for professional and organisational development, reflective practice, quality improvement and evaluation. It is based on principles of Participatory Action Research and uses critical cartography as its methodology. Drawing on ideas from post-qualitative research philosophies, the work blurs binary oppositions of theory and practice, researcher and researched, subject and object. It looks beyond the fixing and boxing of themes and the

problems of interpreting, looking less at what play means and more at the granular detail of how it works. We have developed a range of spatial, more-than-representational methods to support a process of co-producing documentation of everyday playwork practice, and these are used to hold up habits and routines to critical scrutiny to see what more can be thought, said and done to make spaces more open for children's playful productions. This article is a summary of a joint presentation given at an IJPP research seminar held on 22 September 2018 at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. It interweaves concepts and practice, drawing on work with Bridget Handscomb and John Fitzpatrick evaluating the development of Gwealan Tops, Cornwall's first and only adventure playground.

### **Drawing lines: an illustration of method**

Wendy Russell opened the session with a brief outline of the approach. As an opening exercise, participants were asked to think back to entering the room and draw a line from the doorway to where they were sitting at that point. They were asked to try to account for every detail, every detour, every delay, every encounter (see Figure 1).

This dynamic form of diagramming works with movement rather than fixing things to words. It is an embodied description: the *process* of drawing the line will evoke affective aspects of the movements, generally in terms of our desire to seek out the best possible situation wherever we are. These movements are not individual but relational, and not only in terms of encounters with other people, but also material objects (the sign-in table, the book display, walking round tables), elements (not sitting with the sun in your eyes, avoiding the air conditioning vents) and other aspects of comfort (not too near the front, where you can see, who you might want or not want to sit next to). The lines are not aimed at producing a piece of 'data' that is an accurate representation of the journey, they are about process, affect, movement and encounters. To anyone else not present at the seminar, the drawings would not mean much, but that is not the point. Sharing the drawings with others at the seminar would co-produce a shared sense of the space. The point is to find creative and non-representational (Thrift, 2008) or, more appropriately, 'more-than-representational' (Lorimer, 2005) methods that can work with movement, affect, space and relations in-

between bodies, desires, material objects, atmospheres and so on. They form part of a process aimed at opening up space to possibility, rather than fixing meanings.

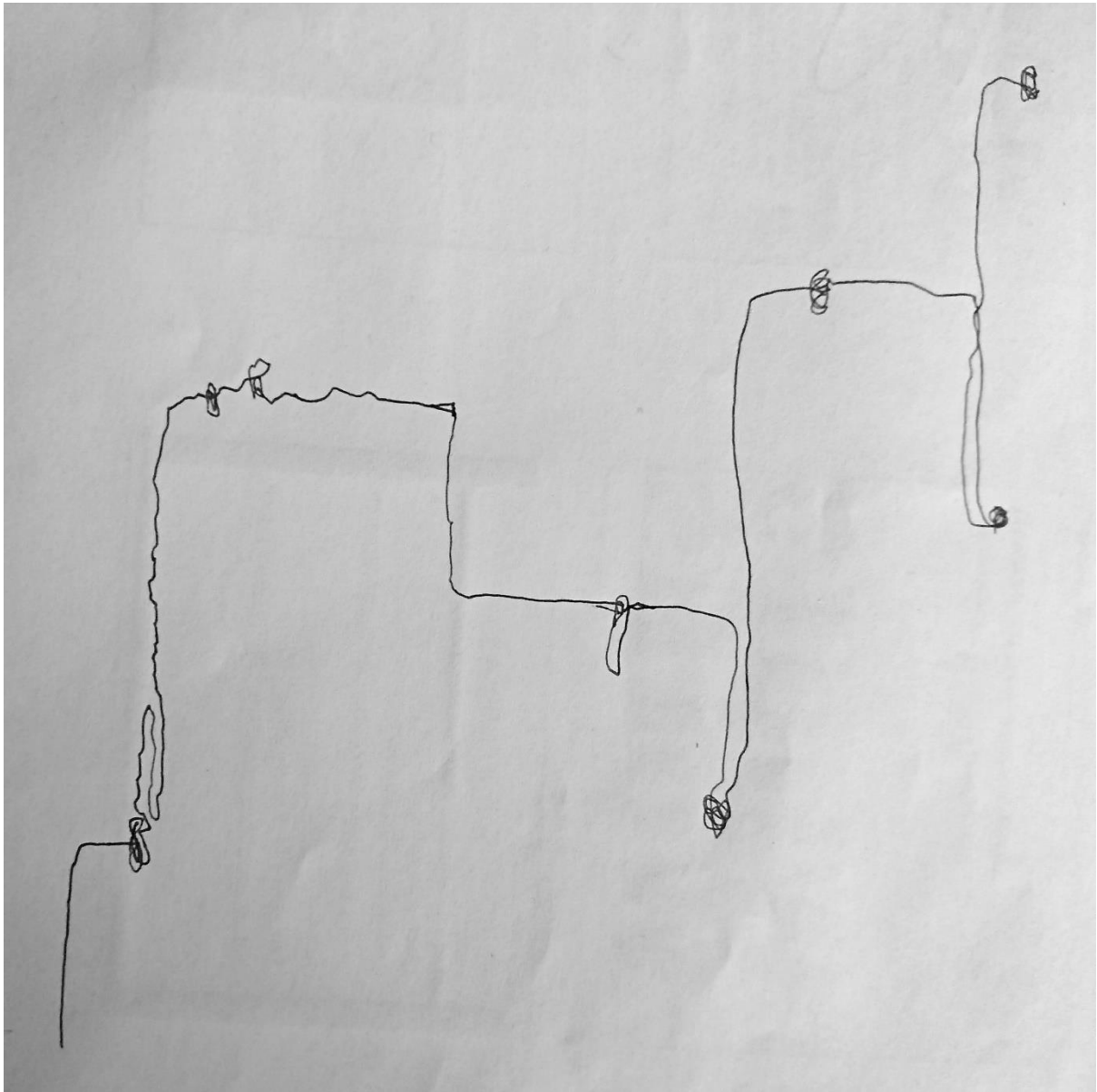


Figure 1: a line from door to seat

### Action research

General characteristics of action research might be summarised rather simply thus: it is about creating knowledge through collective action; it is reflective and therefore cyclical, but these may not be the nice neat theoretical cycles that the literature outlines; and it aims

to change the social system under investigation (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2003; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). This may be in terms of professional development and changes in practice, or it may be an issue of social justice and political change.

Our approach to Participatory Action Research (PAR) is to place an emphasis on collaborative and open-ended process. It blurs distinctions between theory, research and practice. We often talk about applying theory to practice, or theory underpinning practice, conceptualising theory and practice as two separate things that operate on different planes and sometimes on different planets. In our approach the aim is to co-create knowledges based in practice wisdom that also works *with* – and *produces* – theory. This practice wisdom is singular and situated. We are not seeking generalisations: we stay with the particular.

It should be acknowledged that we are not claiming that this is the ‘right’ or only way to do research. Positivism and interpretivism, quantitative and qualitative, empirical and conceptual research epistemologies and methods are important. This is about and/or rather than a binary either/or: it is a generative endeavour rather than a replacement. What we have become interested in is looking at detail, drawing out the things that generalising and theming – a common way of analysing data in qualitative research – might obscure in the process of squashing singular details into categories. We often think of theory as being neat and clean, and we know that practice is very messy, so what this approach to research tries to do is to work with the messiness. That messiness is relational, it is about how everything relates to everything else, not just people but also to material objects, history, affect, movement – all relate. Knowledge emerges from these relations and encounters and in messy and singular ways. All the things you are told not to do in quantitative and some forms of qualitative research is what we’re interested in looking at here. It works with theories of post-qualitative research (for example, Lather 2013, 2015; St. Pierre, 2015), new materialisms (for example, Hein, 2016; Lenz-Taguchi, 2014) and post-humanism (for example, Braidotti, 2013; Lester, 2015). It moves away from seeing humans as the centre of the universe and our obsession with looking at individuals, and particularly individuals’ minds, not even their bodies. The 20th century was the century of psychology, Nikolas Rose (2007) tells us, and we find it very hard to think about anything other than a psychological

perspective. We rush to interpret, to impose meaning, based on what might be going on in people's minds and their behaviour.

Our research approach has been used in a number of contexts, including professional and organisational development, as part of evaluation, in our work with some Welsh local authorities on approaches to play sufficiency. The particular example that we look at here is part of an evaluation for a Lottery funded project which was to set up Cornwall's first and only adventure playground, at Gwealan Tops in Redruth, UK.

Our approach involves working with the co-production of what we call *playwork documentation*. This is not to be confused with data – it is data, but perhaps not in the normal sense, as can be seen from the lines drawn earlier. This documentation forms the basis of twin processes of account-ability and response-ability (more on this below). The researcher (and in this case the evaluator) plays a role of facilitation, which involves holding, motivating, nudging, asking provocative questions, setting up meetings to talk about the documentation, and so on. And this also allows for working with theory, but not applied theory in the traditional sense. In the course of a conversation about something that happened, or a piece of documentation, it might feel appropriate to introduce some theory, and this is worked *with* and new practice wisdom emerges.

### **Critical cartography as methodology**

Action research is not a methodology, it is an approach to research, so those using action research need to choose a methodology. The methodology we have been developing is called critical cartography, based on mapping. It works with geography, looking at how space works. It is not about individual children or playworkers, but the space. Space too is seen as relational and dynamic: it is produced through encounters in-between children's bodies, their desires, adult bodies and desires, material objects, expectations, histories, and so on. These all come together to produce what we might call a play space. What we do is work to develop the capacity to look at how the space works. In addition, 'mapping' is also about possibility rather than truth, accuracy, representation (although some of it could be about those things), and 'what if?' and 'what more?' are key questions asked.

A core principle is that it moves away from defining and fixing play and from making statements about why it is important, and looks instead at how it works, how it happens. More and more playworkers are having to justify their existence in terms of how play helps policy agendas of the day (obesity, crime reduction, social development, community cohesion). We do not look at that (although it is difficult to ignore). There is plenty of research showing the benefits of playing, so this approach focuses on paying attention to the conditions in which play might emerge. A focus on justifying playing through its instrumental benefits leads adults to value some forms of playing over others if they are seen to be more effective in meeting those policy led outcomes. When we do that, what happens to moments of just messing about, moments of nonsense? Of course, they do still happen, but they are not that evident in how we write about our work, and that is a big gap.

Critical cartography can work with the value of playwork beyond instrumental outcomes. It works with the everyday and the mundane rather than peak moments and critical incidents. It focuses on developing an ability to pay attention to the processes that contribute to the co-production of spaces where children can play.

### **Account-ability and response-ability**

These are the twin processes that guide the documentation and research. Account-ability is about finding ways to account for children's play, working with the messiness of the world and taking account of everyday rhythms and movements; response-ability is about our adult responses to that in terms of co-creating conditions where play can emerge. These processes might be some formation of action research cycles, but they work hand-in hand, they are not separate processes. The process of producing documentation is collaborative and there are conversations as things go on and changes happen there and then, during both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). It is not a case of collecting all your data, sitting down a looking at it and then agreeing what changes will be made. It could be, but more often, change arises in the process of practice and co-producing documentation. Response-ability is about developing the capability to be responsive to the movements and rhythms of everyday life on the playground and make changes, but these changes might be very small. They are not made to solve problems or with any expected outcome. It is a 'what if?' approach – 'what if we did this?' and seeing what happens. The



point is to develop skills in making sense (through all of the senses) of the space and working to support the conditions where play can emerge.

### The power of the example

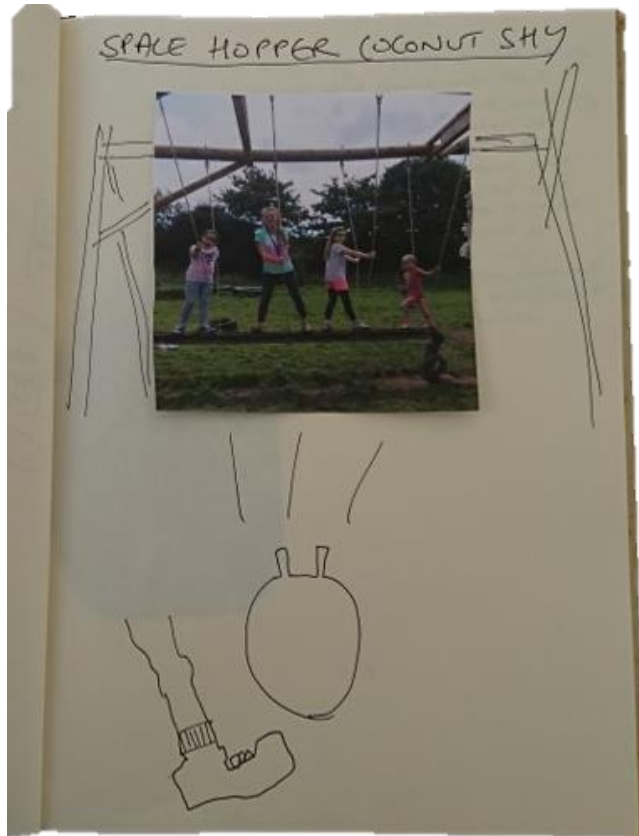


Figure 2: Space hopper coconut shy

This is from a journal being kept by one of the playworkers. The photo, drawing and title are all that are needed to appreciate the moment being documented. This shows how play emerges from whatever is to hand in very opportunistic and spontaneous ways, often drawing on rituals and habits of the playground culture and atmosphere as well as the people and material objects. It is this emergence that the twin processes of account-ability and response-ability work with: what is it that helps these moments emerge?

And for that you need messiness, detail, the singular. This 'story' is but one of many examples. Theming and generalising loses the power of the singular example. An example cannot stand for any more than itself: it can't generalise and it has value.

### Playwork documentation

At this point in the presentation, Wendy handed over to Bridget Handscomb and John Fitzpatrick, managers of Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, to introduce more examples of the kinds of documentation they have been producing. They spoke about how they found each of the things they do (which change each time they do them depending on context and people) deep and enriching. Their involvement in the project is useful for reporting what they do to the Lottery as a funder, for professional and organisational development and it is also the essence of their teamwork, their reflective practice, observations and day-to-day work. It is totally embedded. It is difficult to separate out research and practice.

Examples of documentation were introduced and were also available for participants to look at:

- The first piece of documentation, which is repeated often as the site and the team change, is a mapping exercise of the space. It is done from memory, individually and then as a team, and through the conversation other features of the landscape are added. The dialogue is an important aspect of this. Some accuracy of representation is helpful, but that is less important than the process of co-producing the map, which often takes on a life of its own, eliciting stories, laughter and other features such as the playground cat. The process is important and the map forms the basis for other types of documentation as well.
- Another early exercise is that playworkers are asked to take photographs of three areas of the playground that are significant for them in some way. Participants at the seminar shared some of their significant spaces. These were about feelings (joy, anxiety, wonder, etc.), and relationships with these spaces. The photos are placed on the maps and shared with the team.
- Working with the senses beyond vision is important in terms of developing a sense of the space. Practitioners write sounds, smells, feelings of particular areas onto post-its and place these onto the map as a group exercise.
- Lines: as with the opening lines exercise, playworkers track the movements of particular children or playworkers, or even objects, as they move through the space. These lines can also be annotated with snippets of conversation. They show wayfaring, meandering and encounters with others (people and things).

- After holiday sessions, the team works on a long roll of paper to draw or write brief notes of moments that they have noticed during the session. Again, the collaborative process gives rise to much discussion and laughter, as well as sharing of information.
- Story telling is used, and these can be recorded onto the map, in journals, on an online platform or using WhatsApp. These stories are again of everyday moments of playfulness that often get overlooked in more traditional ways of documenting playwork. An example is given here:

Scarlet and a couple of other girls raced to the dragon swing and started swinging really fast. Theo was passing and Scarlet shouted at him to get in the way of the swing and jump out of the way at the last second in a version of chicken. Theo gave himself lots of time to get out of the way and Scarlet was trying to get him to wait until the last second and he was having none of it. She complained to him that it was no fun if he wasn't in any danger of getting hit by the dragon swing.

- Photos are often used to quickly record moments and atmospheres, or to ask questions about the space. During a particularly wet autumn and winter on the playground, one playworker shared a photo, saying “I am posting up this photo as it shows what has been a really typical day over the last few months of drizzle and mizzle, the waterlogged playground and mud! What impact has the weather made on what we do and what the children do and our day to day playwork?”
- Video is also used, including using fixed camera filming for a lengthy period that can then be speeded up and watched to see overall flows, rhythms and movements of the space.
- Sound recordings are also useful, as they produce different responses from using sight as the dominant sense. Sound clips are taken of areas of the playground and others can try to guess where it was.
- The playground has also used an illustrator who draws what she sees, often with some annotation. Occasionally, the children notice they are being drawn, and this becomes incorporated into the drawing.

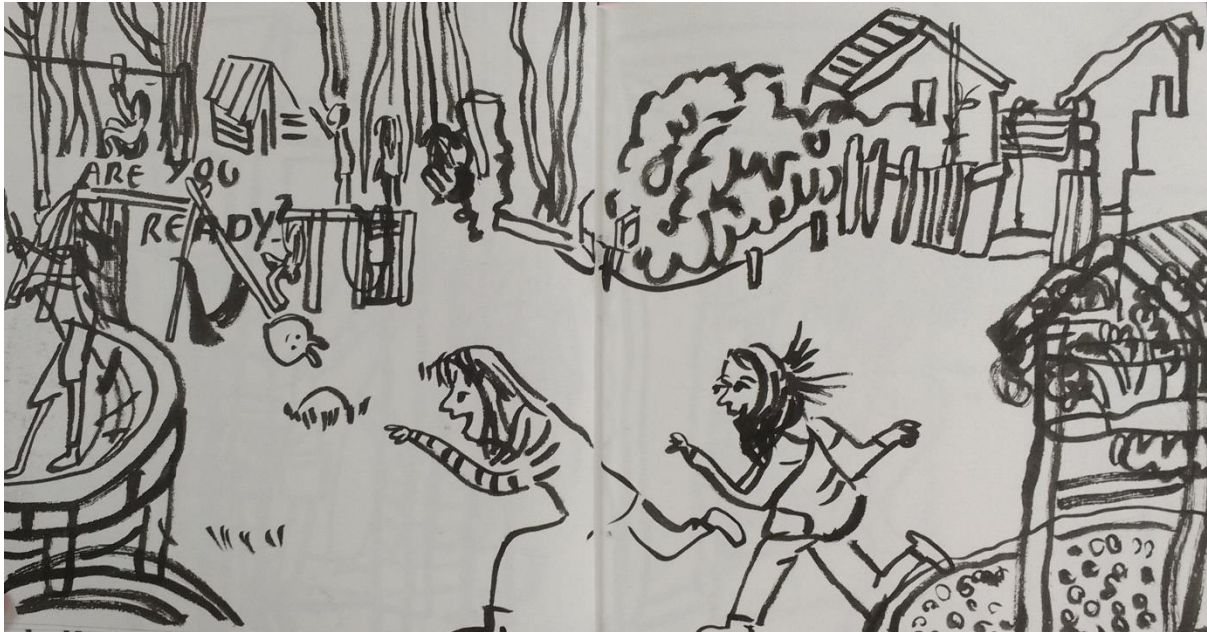


Figure 3: Are You Ready? (Leah Boote, 2018)

To summarise, a number of principles can be outlined for the approach. It is about working with processes and relations; it works with maps and space; creative non-representational methods are used that can work with more than words; attention is paid to detail, the singular and the example; attention is paid to everyday atmospheres; the point is not to interpret but to see how it works; it is an open-ended approach that works with possibility, so 'what if?' and 'what more?' are important questions.

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